Gallery Guide

Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal

The Cleveland Museum of Art
August 2–September 24, 1995

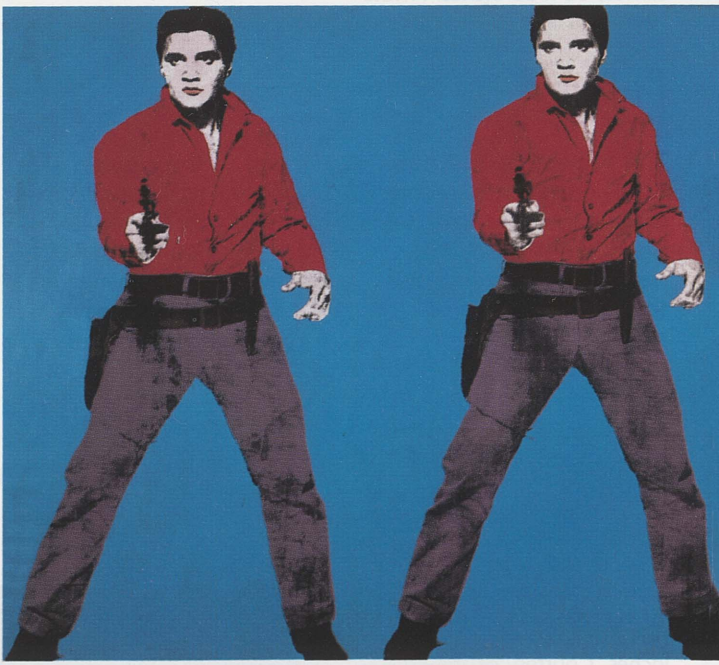
Marilyn Monroe

Born Norma Jean Baker (or Mortenson) in Los Angeles, California, June 1, 1926; died in Brentwood, California, August 5, 1962. The illegitimate daughter of a depressive mother, Marilyn spent her early life in foster homes. Selected as a model by an army photographer in 1944, she became a popular armed forces' pin-up. She won a Twentieth Century-Fox contract in 1946 and played minor roles, becoming a box-office attraction and, ultimately, one of the most celebrated film personalities of her time. Hers was the classic show-business tragedy, however. Stardom seemed a burden; being an international sex goddess, even more so. Her second husband (for nine months, in 1954) was baseball star Joe DiMaggio. Following her third marriage (1956–61, to playwright Arthur Miller), she struggled to understand theories of acting and hoped to star in the classics. This goal was never realized and she became so difficult to work with that she was virtually unemployable. Yet her personal exuberance and freshness transcended her limitations in the handful of comedies in which she starred: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), T*he Seven-Year Itch* (1955), *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957), and *Some Like It Hot* (1959). She also performed successfully in two dramatic roles, *Bus Stop* (1956) and *The Misfits* (1961). Controversy still surrounds Marilyn's suicide (or murder?) by an overdose of sleeping pills, at age 36.

Long after their deaths,

Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe remain among the handful of celebrities recognized worldwide by the mention of just their first names. This exhibition explores the continued global fascination with the king and queen of American popular culture as well as the role artists play in the myth-making process.

Elvis + Marilyn is divided into four sections: cultural, heroic, mythic, and religious. These themes demonstrate four possible ways of thinking about Elvis and Marilyn—as celebrity, hero/heroine, god/goddess, and icon. Whether their achievements as artists or as human beings warrant this type of treatment is, of course, debatable, but their status as cultural phenomenons is undeniable.

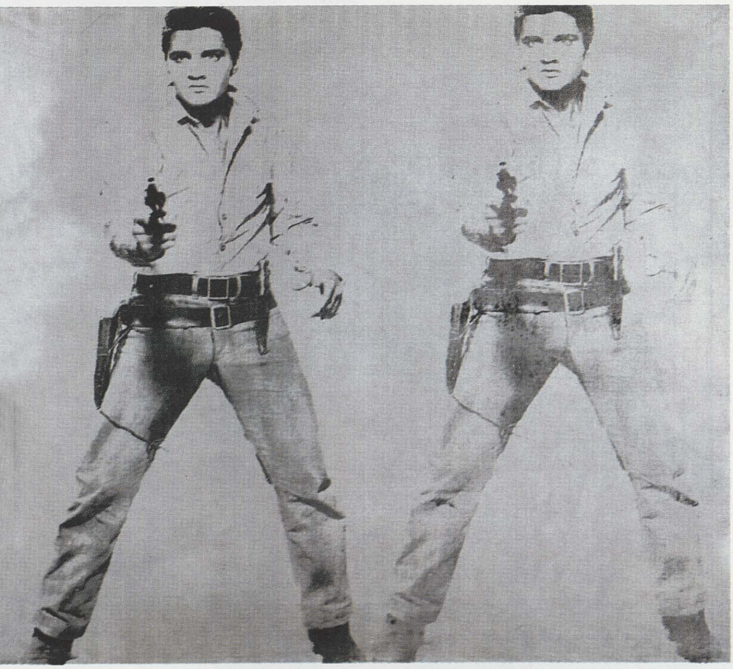


Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987), *Elvis I and II,* 1964. Two canvas panels: screenprint on acrylic and screenprint on aluminum paint, each panel 82 1/2 x 82 1/2 inches. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; gift from the Women's Committee Fund, 1966

The Artists

Elvis + Marilyn features works of art dating from 1955 to 1994. The selection of paintings, sculpture, photographs, folk art, mixed media, video, and installation pieces chronicles the past 40 years of contemporary art. For centuries, artists provided the forms for society's heroes. Today, because of photography, film, and television, artists now furnish cultural commentary using images already established in the minds of the public. *Elvis + Marilyn* illustrates this process through the work of 96 artists, ranging from the established to the emerging. The show also reveals the broad scope of the issues—aesthetic, economic, political, religious, sexual, and social—that motivate them.

A number of works in the exhibition refer to the art of Andy Warhol. Several artists in the exhibition "quote" his silkscreens of studio publicity photos of Elvis and Marilyn, reminding us that Warhol achieved his own icon status in the evolving 20th-century notion of the artist as star.



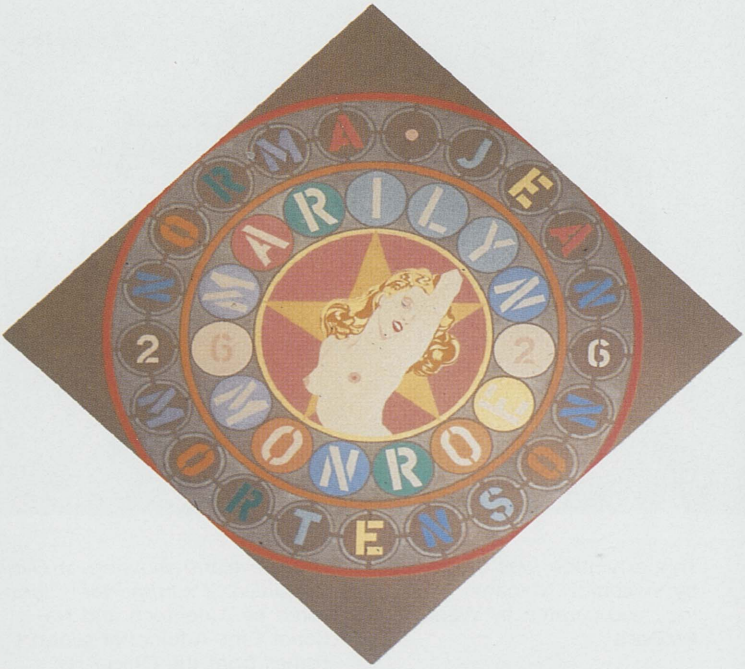
This exhibition was organized by Exhibition Management, Inc., and curated by Wendy McDaris

The Cleveland showing of *Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal* is sponsored by Ameritech and National City. Additional support comes from the Ohio Arts Council. Promotional support is provided by WMJI Majic 105.7.

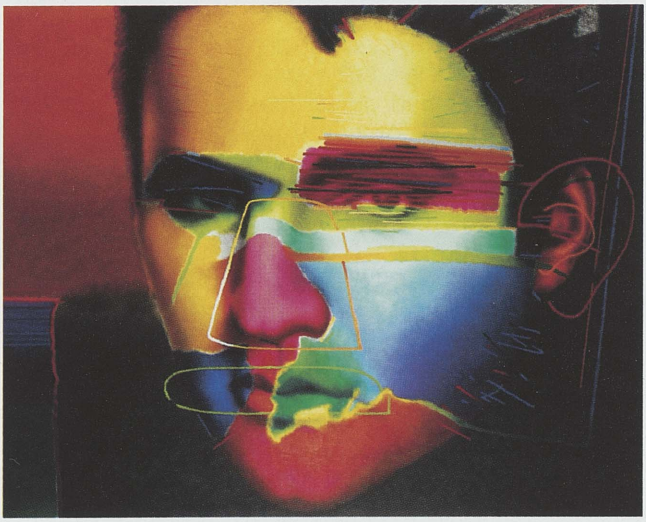
Icon

Elvis and Marilyn are often referred to as "icons of mid-20th-century America." What does this really mean?

"Icon," a Greek word that simply means image, has come more specifically to define a sacred image accorded special veneration in orthodox Christian religious practice. Icons are physical embodiments of the sacred personages depicted. They are vehicles through which mortals can establish contact with the divine. When we refer to Elvis and Marilyn as "icons" we are using the term in a contemporary and secular sense. In this modern usage, the term denotes a person or thing that exemplifies a certain time or place. Contemplation of an orthodox icon is a means of making contact with the divine; contemplation of an "icon" of this modern secular variety is a means of making contact with an aspect of a particular—if often fleeting—cultural or historical moment.



Robert Indiana (American, born 1928), *The Metamorphosis of Norma Jean Mortenson*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 102 x 102 inches. Collection of Robert L. B. Tobin, San Antonio



Ed Paschke (American, born 1939), *Matinee,* 1987. Oil on canvas, 68 x 80 inches. Private collection, Chicago

Cultural

The impact of the mass media lies in the power of bold, commonly recognized imagery to convey information quickly. Images of Elvis and Marilyn have been embedded in the public consciousness through newspapers, magazines, advertisements, posters, television, film, and video. In these contexts, Elvis and Marilyn function simply as symbols of beauty, fame, fortune, rebellion, and sex. Keenly aware of this transformation, many artists have incorporated the very same images of these two celebrities in their work. In so doing, they use Elvis and Marilyn as a means to comment, both positively and negatively, on our culture.

Rancillac (French, born 1931), *Young Marilyn,* 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 35 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie du Centre, Paris, with acknowledgment to Marcel Fleiss

Heroic

Marilyn has been dead for 33 years and Elvis for 18, and each already inhabits the realm of legend. The facts of their tragic rags-to-riches life stories are now interwoven with fantasy, and they are portrayed not only as larger than life but also as worthy of adulation and emulation. Sometimes they are identified with heroes and heroines, both past and present. The artists included in this section recognize these tendencies, and indulge in them, too, occasionally with great seriousness of purpose but more often with good-natured humor or biting sarcasm.

Robert Arneson (American, 1930–1992), *Elvis,* 1978. Conté and pastel on paper, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York

Kathy M. Yancey (American, born 1951), *Worshipping Venus From Afar,* 1992. Gouache and collage on board, 30 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches. Collection of John C. Yancey, Atlanta

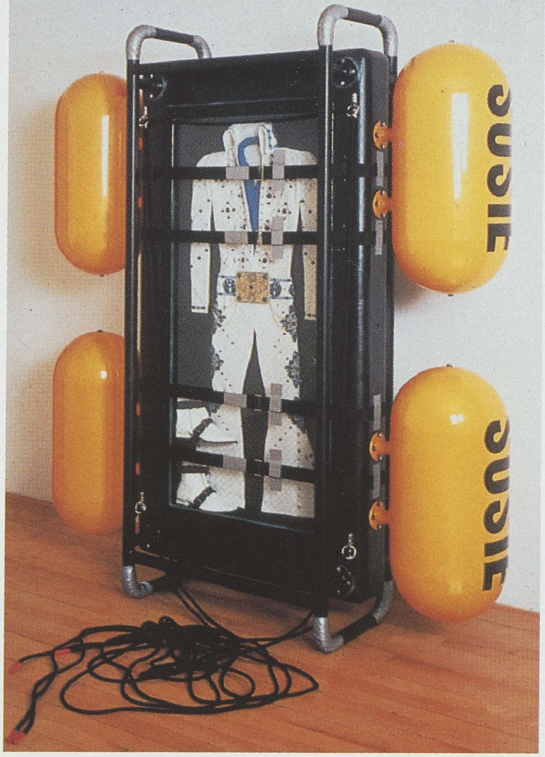
Mythic

In this section of the exhibition, we meet the Elvis and Marilyn of the imagination. Marilyn is the "Golden Girl"—blonde, smiling, vulnerable, sensual. Elvis, the "King," is strong yet sensitive—masculine and successful, but also innocent and passive. We don't know these two people we call Elvis and Marilyn. We know only their recorded performances, their popular images, and their legends. What was it like to be Elvis and Marilyn? The artists included here offer some of their ideas.

Audrey Flack (American, born 1931), *Marilyn: Golden Girl,* 1978. Oil over acrylic on canvas, 48 x 62 inches. Collection of Debra and Robert Waxman, Hamilton, Ontario; courtesy of Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

Keith Haring (American, 1958–1990), *Untitled,* 1981. Sumi ink and metallic ink on printed poster, 38 1/2 x 26 3/4 inches. The Estate of Keith Haring

Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954), *Untitled,* 1982. Color coupler print, 21 x 17 inches. Collection of Beverly Schoenfeld



Religious

The depiction of Elvis and Marilyn allows many artists to explore a spiritual realm. The worship, adoration, and perpetuation of the memories of Elvis and Marilyn closely resemble a religion. This is especially true for Elvis. He is constantly referred to as the "King." His birthplace in Tupelo and his home, Graceland, in Memphis are destinations for pilgrimage. His life story has taken the shape of a gospel. His devotees buy "icons" and "relics" associated with him. They see Elvis as having divine qualities. His music is frequently consulted for inspiration and guidance. There is an Elvis priesthood—the impersonators who are seen to represent the body of Elvis to his people here on Earth. Elvis fans collect for charity and do good works in his name. They claim for Elvis the power of healing. Some talk of feeling his presence. Others say they have seen him in his resurrected form.

Ashley Bickerton (American, born Barbados 1959), *Seascape: Floating Costume to Drift for Eternity,* 1992 (above). Mixed media, 92 x 81 x 41 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Michael and Heather Martin-Daniels (American, both born 1963), *Altar to Self-Indulgence and Decadence*, 1988 (right). Mixed media, 71 x 83 x 13 inches (opened). Courtesy of the artists

Why Elvis and Marilyn?

"In spite of the obvious differences between Elvis and Marilyn, there are also remarkable similarities between these two American icons. They were both supreme heartthrobs of the fifties. They shared many characteristics: their paradoxical mixture of power and fragility, of control and vulnerability; their aliveness and sexual allure; their combined hurt-child/adult god(dess) personae; their fabled promiscuity, which may have arisen more from a desire to be nurtured than from directly sexual needs; their dysfunctional family backgrounds; their rise from poverty and liminal social status to dizzying heights of success and fame; their isolation from real life and alienation from their true abilities by hosts of handlers, press agents, media moguls, and hangers-on; their failure to fulfill their initial promise; their loneliness and bouts of depression; their rejection and abandonment by those they loved; their ultimate rejection of their fame, their personae, and their core selves; their premature deaths through drug overdoses; the continuing fascination of the public with their deaths, accompanied by feelings of ambivalence or irresolution about their true character; and their sustained life-after-death in books, magazine articles, and newspapers, in allusions to them in the visual media, in their hosts of imitators, and in multitudes of rumors among the general population. While Marilyn has not, to our knowledge, been sighted in parking lots, supermarkets, or fast-food outlets, her image remains as pervasive on film and elsewhere as Elvis's voice does on recordings."

From Bruce Heller and Alan C. Elms, "Elvis Presley: Character and Charisma," in *Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal*, edited by Geri DePaoli. New York: Rizzoli, 1994, p. 73.

Elvis Aron Presley

Born in East Tupelo, Mississippi, January 8, 1935; died in Memphis, Tennessee, August 16, 1977. Born into a poor white sharecropping family in the rural South, Elvis heard from an early age the music that shaped his singing style, including country, rhythm and blues, and gospel. In 1948 the Presleys moved to Memphis and he worked as a truck driver after finishing high school. He began recording for Sam Phillips on Sun Records in 1954. Elvis won considerable attention and eventually, with the help of his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, a recording contract with RCA Victor. With national promotion, subsequent recordings became instant hits: "Heartbreak Hotel" (1956), followed by "Hound Dog," "Don't Be Cruel," and "Love Me Tender." Elvis added other hits in 1957 and 1958, notably "All Shook Up" and "Jailhouse Rock." His initial fame resulted partly from his controversial concert performances. On stage, he adopted a tough, rebellious manner and used sexually suggestive movements that excited teenagers but offended many adults. Elvis made his motion-picture debut in *Love Me Tender* (1956) and later appeared in 32 other movies. His early career was interrupted by the death of his beloved mother, Gladys (1958), and army service in Germany (1958–60). He was married once, to Priscilla Beaulieu (1967–73); their daughter, Lisa Marie, was born in 1968.

From the late 1960s until his death, Elvis recorded many songs with slower rhythms and traditional melodies. This style won him popularity with older audiences who flocked to his live shows in Las Vegas. His later songs included "In the Ghetto" (1969), "Suspicious Minds" (1969), "The Wonder of You" 1970), and "American Trilogy" (1971). Heavily dependent on drugs at the end of his life, Elvis died of heart failure at the age of 42 and was buried at Graceland, his home in Memphis.

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